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ELECTION '76: THE POLLS AND THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE

ANNCR:

THE LATEST PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS SHOW PRESIDENT FORD STILL CLOSING IN ON DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER, BUT DESPITE THE FORD GAINS MOST POLITICAL EXPERTS CONTINUE TO SEE A CARTER VICTORY. CHARLES MEDD EXPLAINS.

VOICE:

SEPTEMBER WAS NOT A VERY GOOD MONTH FOR JIMMY CARTER. IN JUST THIRTY DAYS' TIME, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY CANDIDATE SAW HIS OVERWHELMING LEAD IN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS ALL BUT DISAPPEAR, ALONG WITH SOME OF HIS REPUTATION AS A POLITICAL GENIUS.

JUST WHY IT ALL HAPPENED DEPENDS OF COURSE ON WHO DOES THE EXPLAINING. CARTER CRITICS BLAME IT ON WHAT THEY CALL A SERIES OF POLITICAL BLUNDERS THAT REVEALED TO THE VOTERS HIS INEXPERIENCE OR HIS INEPTITUDE, OR BOTH. CARTER SUPPORTERS, ADMITTING TO CAMPAIGN MISTAKES, SAY THEY CAME AS THEIR MAN WAS OUT PRESENTING HIS CASE TO THE PUBLIC WHILE HIS OPPONENT REMAINED BEHIND THE PRESIDENTIAL TRAPPINGS OF THE WHITE HOUSE.

WHATEVER THE EXPLANATION, THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER SAW A SHARP SWING IN POPULAR SENTIMENT TOWARD PRESIDENT FORD THAT HAS CONVERTED WHAT ONCE APPEARED TO BE A CARTER RUNAWAY TO WHAT NOW LOOKS LIKE A VERY CLOSE ELECTION CONTEST. AND WHILE THE POLITICAL MOMENTUM IS NOW CLEARLY ON THE PRESIDENT'S SIDE, MOST EXPERTS BELIEVE A DEMOCRATIC VICTORY REMAINS THE MORE LIKELY POSSIBILITY.

THE ASSUMPTION IS BASED TO A LARGE DEGREE ON THE WAY VOTER SENTIMENT IS DISTRIBUTED AND HOW THAT DISTRIBUTION AFFECTS THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE. THAT'S THE TWO-CENTURY-OLD INSTITUTION BY WHICH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTORS ARE APPORTIONED TO EACH STATE ON THE BASIS OF POPULATION. UNDER THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE SYSTEM, THE STATES WITH THE MOST PEOPLE -- LIKE NEW YORK, CALIFORNIA AND OTHERS THAT ARE HEAVILY INDUSTRIALIZED -- ARE BY FAR THE MORE POLITICALLY INFLUENTIAL. PUT ANOTHER WAY, THE CANDIDATE WHO WINS THE RIGHT COMBINATION OF THE MORE POPULOUS STATES -- EVEN BY THE NARROWEST OF MARGINS -- CAN ACQUIRE MORE ELECTORAL VOTES THAN AN OPPONENT WHO WINS A MAJORITY OF THE OTHER STATES BY OVERWHELMING MARGINS. THREE TIMES IN AMERICAN HISTORY THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE DENIED VICTORY TO CANDIDATES WHO HAD WON THE LARGEST POPULAR VOTE, THE LAST TIME IN THE YEAR EIGHTEEN EIGHTY-EIGHT.

AT THIS STAGE, MOST OBSERVERS GIVE PRESIDENT FORD A LEAD IN THE CENTRAL, FARMING STATES AND A SMALL, HANDFUL OF TRADITIONALLY REPUBLICAN STATES IN THE WEST. THEY ALSO SEE MISTER CARTER LEADING THROUGHOUT MUCH OF HIS NATIVE SOUTH AND IN A SMALL NUMBER OF TRADITIONALLY DEMOCRATIC STATES IN THE NORTH. THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT THE STATES NOW LEANING IN THE CARTER DIRECTION HAVE FAR MORE ELECTORAL VOTES.

THE SEPTEMBER POLLS SHOWED A MONTH-LONG DECLINE IN JIMMY CARTER'S OVERALL POPULAR STRENGTH, A DECLINE THAT CUT INTO HIS ONCE-SUBSTANTIAL LEAD ACROSS THE COUNTRY. BUT AS LONG AS THE DEMOCRAT REMAINS AHEAD IN KEY STATES WITH ENOUGH ELECTORAL VOTES, THE EXPERTS WILL IGNORE THE POLLS AND WILL CONTINUE TO PREDICT A CARTER VICTORY.

SV/MAH/PBM